DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 998 TM 030 796

AUTHOR Heinrich, K. T.; Intriligator, B.; Kennedy, P.; Miller, Regina

TITLE Focus Groups: An Innovative Educational, Research and Evaluation Strategy for Professional Schools.

PUB DATE 2000-04-00

NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *Educational Research; *Focus Groups; Higher Education; *Research Methodology; *Scholarship

ABSTRACT

In an interactive symposium, participants (7 male and 15 female college faculty members) were experientially introduced to focus groups by participating in a focus group. They learned key concepts related to focus group research through an exemplar. A research project was described that involved professional college faculty in focus groups that explored how E. Boyer's (1995) expanded definition of scholarship fits their scholarly work. Participants then designed their own focus group projects around issues that require collective action and interaction. After this introduction, it is hoped that participants will conduct focus group research in the future as a step in exploring substantive issues relevant to the profession. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

AERA 2000, New Orleans
Division I

Focus Groups: An Innovative Educational, Research and Evaluation Strategy for Professional Schools

K.T. Heinrich PhD, B. Intriligator PhD, P. Kennedy PhD & Regina Miller PhD
University of Hartford

ED 440 998

Abstract

In this interactive symposium, participants were experientially introduced to focus groups by participating in a focus group. They learned key concepts related to focus group research through an exemplar. We described a research project that involved our professional college, faculty in focus groups that explored how Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship fit our scholarly work. Participants then designed their own focus group projects around issues that require collective action and interaction. After this introduction, it is hoped participants will proceed to conduct focus group research as a step in exploring substantive issues relevant to the professions.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

K.T. Heinrich

1

TM030796

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Objectives

In the last decade of this century, educational research became "a fertile site for the proliferation of new forms of and new approaches to inquiry " (Lenzo, 1995). Focus group research, one of these new approaches to inquiry, allows participants to learn from each other's viewpoints and brings the insights of multiple perspectives to bear in solving educational problems and improving methods of scholarly inquiry. The co-researchers learned the power of this educative and collaborative approach for knowledge building when they used focus groups to explore how one professional school faculty composed of three disciplines -- education, nursing, and health professions -- described their scholarly work and wanted it evaluated and rewarded in light of Ernest Boyer's (1990) expanded definition of scholarship.

This interactive symposium actively engaged participants in a brief focus group experience; overviewed the design and findings of an actual focus group inquiry as an exemplar of focus group research; and, guided participants in designing a focus group project to collaboratively explore a salient issue in their own settings.

Theoretical Framework

In 1990, Boyer stated, "What we urgently need today is a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar -- a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching" (p. 24). Boyer expands the traditional definition of scholarship when he posits that "the work of faculty is scholarly whether they are involved in the advancing knowledge in a field, integrating knowledge through the structuring of a curriculum, transforming knowledge through the challenging intellectual work involved in teaching and facilitating learning, or applying knowledge to a compelling problem in the community" (Rice, 1996, p. 10). His four scholarships include

the scholarship of: 1) "teaching and learning" which makes links between teacher's knowledge and students' understanding; 2) "engagement and practice" in which professional knowledge is applied to real life problems within the community; 3) "integration and synthesis" which brings cross-disciplinary knowledge to bear on an issue; and, 4) "discovery" which is the advancement of knowledge traditionally defined as scholarship by the academy.

While Boyer believed it is crucial to the health of the academy, our communities, and the nation for scholars to share their knowledge from their fields to benefit society (Coye, 1997), he also recognized that professional schools have problematic relationships being "*at* their universities, but not *in* and *of* the university". Nowhere is this uneasy fit more apparent than when examining how scholarship has traditionally been defined within university settings in contrast to what is valued within professional schools. According to Schon (1995), the price of admission of professional schools into the university is adopting "technical rationality", which is viewing professional practice as though it consisted of the application of science or systematic knowledge to the instrumental problems of practice (Anderson & Herr, 1999) . Other research approaches are suspect and have to be strongly defended when faculty members are reviewed for promotion and tenure. This is particularly true of professional schools housed within what Boyer and Wong call the "New American University" (Berberet & Wong, 1995). This is a third model of university, beyond liberal arts and research institutions, that "celebrates teaching and selectively supports research, while also taking special pride in its capacity to connect thought to action, theory to practice." (Boyer, 1995). Given that such universities are struggling to define themselves, Wong (Berberet & Wong, 1995) suggested that the four "scholarships" as proposed by Boyer could "connect the disconnects" between their missions and those models offered by either research universities or liberal arts colleges. However, Coye (1997) sounded a note of caution about the complex challenges attendant to changing the reward system in which institutional reputations depend upon prestigious faculty whose status is established

through published research. He said that such universities must commit to hiring and rewarding faculty who, in addition to conducting research, are skilled in teaching, integrating, and applying scholarship.

Methods

The University of Hartford, a New American University, integrated Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship into the criteria for promotion and tenure in Fall 1999. Focus groups are often the first step in a program of research (Morgan & Kreuger, 1997). Since there had been no formal discussions in the colleges within the University concerning faculty's scholarly work and Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship, focus groups were an ideal method to explore this issue. This focus group project allowed the faculty members of one College within the University that included three professional schools -- education, nursing, and health professions -- to initiate a dialogue around the types of scholarly activity they were involved in and how they wanted their scholarly work evaluated and rewarded in light of Boyer's four "scholarships".

In Fall 1998, the primary investigator and the College Committee on Promotion, Tenure and Academic Freedom (hereafter referred to as "the co-researchers") formulated the design for this focus group project. They then introduced the project to the College Dean and with his support introduced the project to the faculty who as a group agreed to participate. Based on their review of the literature and their professional experiences, the co-researchers generated a schedule of interview questions. Following the Bennett Method (Heinrich, Coffin-Romig & Bennett, 1998), a trusted colleague facilitated an audio-taped, focus group composed of the Dean and the co-researchers asking them the questions from their interview schedule. After this first focus group, the Dean and the co-researchers discussed their own experiences of participating in this focus group interview and refined the interview questions. A proposal describing the project with the revised interview

schedule was successfully reviewed by the University Human Subjects Committee in December 1998.

Having agreed as a group to participate in this focus group project, College faculty members indicated their availability to participate in focus group meetings by signing up during the January 1999, College faculty meeting. Since the ideal size of a focus group ranges from 6-9 participants (Kreuger, 1997), the co-researchers identified 4 heterogeneous, groups of 6 faculty volunteers representing tenured and non-tenured, senior and junior faculty from across the three Divisions to participate in focus groups. In total, 7 male and 15 female faculty members ranging in age from 33 to 65 representing the 3 Divisions participated.

Each of these four, focus groups were facilitated by a co-researcher during the time usually devoted to the February 1999 Faculty Meeting. During the one and one half hour, focus group, faculty participants answered the two, major research questions, "How do you as College faculty members see your scholarly work fitting with Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship? How do you want your scholarly work to be evaluated for promotion and tenure?" At time of the audio-taped, focus group interview, participants signed release forms and completed a demographic information sheet. Participants were assured that the identities of focus group members was kept confidential and that all data would be coded and reported as group findings.

Kreuger's (1994) seven, systematic steps were used to organize the data gathering and analysis phase during this focus group project: 1) sequencing questions to allow maximum insight; 2) capturing and handling the data on audio tape; 3) coding data and salient emergent themes; 4) participant verification that includes post-focus group verification of the written report; and, 5) debriefing and sharing of all reports by all researchers. Emergent themes were surfaced from the transcribed, focus group interviews. In the April 1999 Faculty meeting, the Committee presented a preliminary report of the findings that combined salient themes from the focus groups with pertinent information

from the literature to make recommendations to the College Dean and faculty members from the Divisions of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions. Verbal and written input from the Dean and faculty further refined the interpretation of the data and informed the findings.

Results

Faculty participants appreciated the opportunity to dialogue about their scholarly lives with faculty colleagues. Participation in this project deepened faculty participants' understanding of the language and intent of Boyer's scholarships and broadened their definition of scholarship to include not only advancing, but applying, integrating, and transforming knowledge. More specifically, participants learned: 1) what College faculty colleagues value about their work; 2) how Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship fits with the work College faculty do; and, 3) how colleagues believed the different forms of scholarship could be evaluated for promotion and tenure within the College. With deeper understanding, their professional respect for colleagues in other Divisions grew. Four salient themes that emerged from the data are briefly discussed below.

"I know what I wanted Boyer to be and after this focus group I know who he really is." Participants entered focus groups with a broad range of levels of understanding and much confusion about how Boyer defined scholarly activity. Those who participated in focus groups came to understand that to be recognized as scholarly, activity must result in a public product that is peer reviewed and presented to groups outside the university. Many were relieved to find that Boyer expanded the accepted venues for scholarly activity to include the types of activities in which they were already engaged.

"I am a clinical expert who feels like an impostor as a faculty member." The requirement that scholarship result in a public product that was presented beyond the University was daunting for many participants who came to the university well socialized as clinicians. Such faculty members often admitted to feeling like impostors as professors.

They said they needed mentoring in becoming productive faculty members, particularly in the roles of educator and scholar. These faculty participants wanted continuing education around producing scholarly products in the form of presentations and publications for academic audiences, as well as, opportunities for collaborative, interdisciplinary research within their Divisions or the College.

"There is a cultural divide between our College and the University." Faculty participants in this study collectively agreed that there was a "values clash" between our Professional School and the University in terms of what is regarded as scholarship and how it is valued in promotion and tenure decisions. In spite of the fact that the University integrated Boyer's language into the promotion and tenure guidelines, participants said that quantitative research in the logical, positivist tradition remains the only type of research unequivocally valued in promotion and tenure reviews.

"I would never do the scholarship of discovery again." Given the institutional constraints -- lack of resources to support research and heavy teaching loads -- most participants saw themselves as applying their professional knowledge to substantive issues in the community rather than conducting traditional research. While they did not wish to see traditional research devalued, most participants agreed they wanted definitions of scholarship and evaluation of scholarship to be as broad as possible.

Educational Importance Of The Study

Professional schools around the country are being challenged to defend practitioner research and other forms of scholarship that are not in keeping with the traditional types of research valued in the academy (Anderson & Herr, 1999). Many participants saw Boyer's expanded definition of scholarship as a way to resolve the discrepancy professional school faculty perceive between the traditional interpretation of scholarship in the university's promotion and tenure criteria and their real work within and beyond the school. They said

that focus groups were a useful way to facilitate dialogue that collectively surfaced salient issues and held the promise of collaborative problem solving efforts toward the possible resolution of this discrepancy.

Conclusion

Focus groups are an innovative and versatile educational, research, and evaluation method (Heinrich & Witt, 1998). Conference participants in this interactive symposium were introduced to focus groups by participating in a focus group, learned key concepts related to focus group research through an overview of an actual research project, and, designed their own focus group project around an issue that requires collective action and interaction. Focus group research can inform the national dialogue around issues specific to professional schools. It is hoped faculty will design focus group research projects as a first step in exploring substantive issues relevant to the professions.

References

Anderson, G.L. & Herr, K. (1999, June-July). The new paradigm wars: Is there room for rigorous practitioner knowledge in schools and universities? Educational Researcher, 28(5), 12 -21.

Berberet, J. & Wong, F. (1995, Winter). The new American college: A model for liberal learning. Liberal Education, 48-52.

Boyer, E.L. (1995). The basic school: A community for learning. Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer, E.L. (1990). Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate. Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Coye, D. (1997, May/June). Ernest Boyer and the new American college: Connecting the disconnects. Change, 21-29.

Krueger, R.A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. (Second Edition.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Heinrich, K., Coffin-Romig, N., Bennett, S. (1998, April 13-17). Mid-life doctoral women as passionate scholars: An exploratory study. American Educational Research Association 1998 Annual Meeting. San Diego, CA.

Heinrich, K. & Witt, B. (1998, July/August). Serendipity: A Focus Group turned hermeneutic evaluation. Nurse Educator, 23(4), 40-44.

Morgan, D.L. & Krueger, R.A. (1997). The focus group kit. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Rice, R.E. (1996). Making a place for the new American scholar. Atlanta, GA: 1996 AAHE Conference on Faculty Roles and Rewards.

Schon, D. (1995). The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. The Magazine of Higher Learning, 27(6), 27-34.